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Brewing a more equitable cup – game changers from producers’ perspectives: Examples from Costa Rica, Tanzania, and El Salvador

ANNELIE GÜTTE

Leibniz-Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF), e.V., Germany

Abstract

Costa Rica is considered a country at the forefront of biodiversity conservation and nature protection. Yet, in 2020 87,000 tons of green coffee have been produced in the country – a crop that has been highly criticised from multiple perspectives: Its production has been linked to soil degradation and erosion, biodiversity losses, and water pollution, while common processing techniques are resource-intensive. On top of that, coffee production has been shown to be of low economic viability. Price volatility as well as climate impacts make returns from coffee produce unpredictable. Food insecurity and malnutrition have been shown to occur frequently in coffee farming households around the globe – also because of coffee farmers’ precarious position in the global coffee value chain. How, then, can coffee production fit into a systemic strategy to serve sustainable development? This contribution presents results from field work activities and interviews conducted in El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Tanzania. It discusses different pathways to transform coffee systems into more equitable systems. It provides insights on what coffee farmers perceive as game changers for their coffee businesses, how this changed the way they are growing coffee and which obstacles remain. Pathways discussed include a focus on Specialty Coffee market segments, gender policy initiatives, and capacity building approaches. It is discussed how global power imbalances shape efforts and outcomes of smallholder empowerment. Results suggest that key obstacles to sustainable and equitable coffee production are not to be found at farm level but in non-transparent producer-consumer markets, impermeable value chain hierarchies biased towards importing countries as well as restrictive tariffs and trade barriers. Carrying this to the extreme, true empowerment of smallholder coffee growers might not only shift and transform current trade relations towards more equitable exchange but might have the power to disrupt the global coffee trade system depriving global players of opportunities to profit maximisation – a fact that might explain why efforts of poverty alleviation, food security and empowerment of smallholder coffee growers are either progressing slowly, stagnating or even declining.

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